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DROGPA NAMGYAL: THE LIFE OF A TIBETAN

by

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(Otto Wilhelm Barth-Verlag GMBH, München-Planegg, 1940) 000

/The first two (unnumbered) pages are covered with illustrations, the first of these with the subtitle: "Pyag-rdor (Chag dor), Sanskrit Vajrapani (the carrier of the thunderbolt) with dorje in his hair; one of the defenders of the faith, also a rain god"; the second illustration is of a house with a group of masked figures standing underneath and the inscription RIBBACH DROGPA NAMGYAL./

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FOREWORD

The present description of the life of a Tibetan is based in its first part, up to marriage, upon the detailed accounts that the Tibetan teacher Gau Puntsong, a Buddhist, communicated to me at the time in Leh (in Ladakh). This man was considered one of the best-educated and one of the most intelligent among his countrymen, and he possessed such a thorough knowledge of the customs and practices, the religion and the folklore of his people as could scarcely be found in any other person. The "history" of the Tibetan Drogpa Namgyal (aBrogpa rNamrgyal) which is here told does not lay any claim to being narrative in the sense of a continuous, uninterrupted presentation of the career of one human being. In calling it "a Tibetan life" in the subtitle I wanted to indicate that an attempt has here been made to depict the life of a West Tibetan as it is conducted in a typical day-to-day manner. In so doing I wanted to weave into the narrative as much as was possible an account of the customs and practices, of the religious thought, and of the views and rites as they play their part in daily life, in order to give a picture of the thinking, feeling and actions of the people.

This history was originally intended for publication in the illustrated periodical of the Moravians, Kampf und Sieg /"Battle and

brothers," go, if possible on horseback, to the bride's house in order 585
to buy the bride for the bridegroom. The bride's relatives will not 539
admit them until they have proved their honorable descent by answering a long series of questions addressed to them in the form of songs. As soon as an answer has been given incorrectly, the inhabitants of the house, who are armed with osier twigs, rain blows on the seven men. The songs used on this occasion represent a kind of catechism in the pre-Buddhistic religion of the country. The same thing applies to them as to the Kesar saga. The further West we go, the more complete they are. I first observed this particular ceremonial in the village of Stog, which lies opposite Leh. There they were finished with the question-and-answer ritual in the shortest possible time, and the wedding feast constituted the climax of the celebration. In Khalatse, to which I removed from Leh, the question-and-answer game lasted much longer. Since I was unable to understand anything of the content of the songs during the performance, I requested the leader of the Nyo-pa to dictate these questions and answers slowly to the [24] ●
scribe of Khalatse, Ye-shes-rig-adzin. In this way I obtained a copybook of eighteen songs, each in two parts. I went through these carefully with the scribe and soon arrived at an understanding of the 515
first nine. These nine I published in the Indian Antiquary, giving 113
the text, a translation, and annotations. They appeared there under 539
the title, "The Ladakhi Pre-Buddhist Marriage Ritual." Neither the scribe nor I understood the second part of the songs at that time. By now I am somewhat better able to recognize their meaning, and the songs of the second part will also be used in the following presentation. After the song of the Nyo-pa had been delivered to me, one day someone told me that the question-and-answer game of the wedding celebrants was not yet finished with these songs, and that this game was, in fact, continued during the wedding feast. At that time, he said, they sang the so-called chan-glu, the "beer song." Again I had a transcription made of this song, which I published at my own expense by having about fifty copies printed on the missionary lithographic press in Leh. These appeared (with text only) in 1903 under the title, "Die Trinklieder von Khalatse" /The Drinking Songs of Khalatse/. Although several of these songs have very important mythological content, many others are, nevertheless, of a purely diverting nature. They propose riddles such as one might expect on special occasions in gay circles among all peoples. /4/ [273]
Of special interest is the song which describes in detail the origin and preparation of Tibetan beer (chan).

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Ladak

temporarily married after having converted themselves to the Islamic religion, as their husbands desired. This I understood to be the origin of the Argons.

It will not always be possible when giving an account of the data collected in Leh concerning polyandry to quote, every time, as I have done before, the date and site because much time was spent travelling about with the informants, conversing with them and gathering pieces of information in an informal, non-systematic fashion. This appeared to be the best way in Ladak to gain their confidence and to obtain as much as possible from them. Then also, writings concerning polyandry in this part of the world were available in Leh, either in the Residence of the British Assistant Resident where I stayed, or from the Moravian Mission and from my two principal Christian informants, Joseph Gergan and Nono Tseten P'hüntzok. The names of these works are listed in the accompanying Bibliography.

Since I already knew something about Tibetan polyandry from my observations in Lahul, as described above, I was able, in Leh, to go straight into the subject and to proceed along comparative lines rather than merely to explore unfamiliar fields in which I endeavoured to make discoveries. Thus I was able to find out immediately that the Ladaki type of polyandry was, in essentials, the same as that of Lahul, namely that the holding or house was the pivot, the axis around which it revolved.

The inhabitants of Ladak, having this in common with all people of Tibetan cultural affinity, are also loth to divide up the family property and to see its name die out. Consequently they resort to the same matrimonial and inheritance safeguards as we had seen at work in Lahul: polyandry and either patrilineal or matrilineal succesion, depending upon whether there are male or only female heirs.

I very quickly discovered from my informants that the two big differences from what I had seen before were that, in Ladak, a rule of primogeniture existed by which only the eldest inherited all the property, and that fields were not divided up among brothers, but all belonged to the eldest one alone. I noted that it brought the system of tax collection much more into line with actual ownership for, as I have said, the head of the family unit is responsible, under the Kashmir administration, for the revenue to be gathered from the holding. In other words, the proprietor himself is answerable, and not a number of persons, usually brothers, as they are in Lahul.

If there are boys in a family, it is the eldest son who inherits the

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595 I enquired from the informant why she had married a second husband in this way, considering that she had had children by her first one and that, consequently, it did not seem at all necessary for her to take so drastic a step. Her answer confirmed my belief that a second husband is often brought in in order to acquire more labour for the cultivation of the family plot, for she replied: "I married Tsering P'hüntzok because Tsering was old and unable to work very well any more." She then added the informative remark: "It is cheaper to take an extra husband than a servant."

Neighbours, whom Joseph and I questioned later about this family, assured us, nevertheless, that Lha-dzom had not spoken the truth to us. They scoffed at her statements that she needed more labour on her husband's estate, and said that she was a very ardent woman, whom old Tsering could no longer satisfy sexually. So she had taken Tsering P'hüntzok who was much younger (28 years old, they said), and Tsering had agreed to it because he was tired of his wife's sexual appetite anyway. I must say that in my interview with the woman, I did form the impression that there probably was some truth in the neighbour's gossip. It did not mean, however, that what Lha-dzom had told us was not true; both pronouncements could be correct, for having a new husband, while very pleasant from the matrimonial point of view, was also useful in what concerned the cultivation of the fields. Pleasure and business thus appeared admirably combined in Lha-dzom's case, and Tsering, who could have objected and might have been the major obstacle, made no trouble and accepted the situation. He probably got something out of it, too.

834 ●124 595 I had heard so much about these people's sexual life during these interviews, that it came as a surprise to me when I asked Joseph to enquire if anybody knew anything about father and son polyandry in Kalatse and he refused to do so. We were in conversation with a female neighbour at the time, and Joseph flatly refused to enquire about the subject upon which I wanted information because, he said, it is not possible to question a woman about sexual matters in Tibet if she is either younger or older than yourself. The same applied to close relatives, and the prohibition was called *ka-dzem-ches* (*K'ha-aDzem-Ches*) meaning "mouth to shrink from". What we had been told about Lha-dzom did not come under the category of questioning the woman on sexual affairs, it seemed, since she had volunteered the information which we had heard. What was not possible, I gathered, was for Joseph to put queries about sex to the woman. So I was not able to get the

[TEXT continues on P. 392]

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information that I wanted on the subject of fathers and sons sharing a wife in Kalatse.

Four days later, on the 8th October 1938, we were in Mulbek, the last village where people of Tibetan cultural affinity are to be found on the way westwards. Here, too, I discovered polyandrous families, and interviewed them through Joseph, but with some difficulty. It appeared that we had now reached a frontier area, one in which culture contact with non-polyandrous people existed and, as is usual in such a case, those practising polyandry were self-conscious about the custom and reluctant to speak about it to strangers. The first of two genealogies which I was able, nevertheless, to take down, is given in Table 36.

We went to this household, called Skya-pa, because a Moslem whom Joseph knew in the bazaar had told us that we would find a *porjag* in it. In the neighbourhood of the house we were, however, stopped by its inmates, who refused to let us approach it. They were a surly lot, the women wearing a sort of diminutive *perak* (*berag*) on their forehead and no woollen ears any longer, the men dressed in the usual Ladaki clothes. They seemed very reluctant even to speak to us, and Joseph had the greatest difficulty in getting anything out of them. They said that we could not go to the house because it was dirty, and only with the worst possible grace, condescended to speak to us where we stood, in the lane leading to their home.

A man called Tsering Chömpel was our informant. He told us that his parents, Tsering P'hüntzok his father, and Ngawang Rolma his mother, lived in the *k'hang-gu*, while he with his wife, their four children and his younger brother, Ishe, lived in the *k'hang-chen*. He told us, too, that his two sisters, Yangdzom and Tsering Rolma, were married out in *bag-ma* to other households, respectively to Tsering of T'hustön-pa household, and Chömpel of Tashi Gompa household.

Asked if these two households were polyandrous, he said no, that they were not. Pressed, he added that polyandry was not practised in Mulbek, and that he himself did not share his wife, Stanzin Kündzom, with Ishe. This was denied later by Joseph, who told me that from friends of his in Mulbek, he knew that polyandry existed there just as much as in the rest of Ladak, but that the people did not like to admit it, were shy to do so, and even somewhat ashamed. When I asked about the rumoured *porjag* said to exist there, needless to say, this was hotly denied. We were asked what our source of information was, which we naturally refused to divulge. Whereupon Tsering Chömpel said to Joseph that his family was being slandered.

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Stanzin Kündzom refused to speak during the whole interview. I tried to draw her out at the beginning, but she made it perfectly clear at once that she would only say something if I paid her then and there. Not wishing to do this for fear of setting a bad example and creating a precedent, we carried on with her husband who was somewhat more accommodating, and eventually gave him a monetary reward when we had finished, for which he expressed his thanks.

That same morning, Joseph and I went on to another polyandrous family of Mulbek, called *Yoktso-pa* (*gYog-Ts'hogs-pa*) (Table 37). These people, who appeared to be as poor and as suspicious of us as the others but were slightly more accommodating in that they did admit to being polyandrous, lived in a *k'hang-gu* in which there were two brothers married to one wife, and in a *k'hang-chen*, the inhabitants of which were the two sons of the former and their common wife, young people who had only recently been married and did not yet have any children.

Tsewang, the eldest of the older generation, acted as the informant, but his brother, Tsewang Paljor, and their common wife, Nordzom Rolma, assisted him greatly. These people told us that their parents, Paljor their father, and Skidzom their mother, had died some years ago, and that they were consequently occupying the *k'hang-gu* now themselves, since the marriage of their grown-up children. Their eldest sister, Tseten, was married away in *bag-ma* to three brothers in a household called Alea-pa, while the second sister, also elder to them, Chosang Rolma, was a nun. This woman was present at the interview, and we heard that she was normally resident at Himis gompa, but that she often came home on visits. She had no particular inclination to be a nun, it seemed, since she had been sent to the monastery by her parents when, as a child, she had nearly died, and they had made a vow that if she recovered, they would dedicate her to Himis.

The informant and his brother, together with their common wife, Nordzom Rolma, had had three children, two boys, Sonam Wangyal and Tsewang Tashi, and one daughter, born between these two, called Tashi Pal-mo. The latter was married off to Tashi Sonam of Shak-pa Household, while the two boys had a wife in common, whom they had married recently. Her name was Tashi Kidzom, and they lived with her in the *k'hang-chen*, which they had just taken over. They had been married too short a time to have children yet, and that is all that the words "no issue" mean in the genealogical table.

It had not been too difficult here, to find out that these people were

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Toda AW60
Tibet AJ1
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APPENDIX 2

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In all four fields of my ethnographical research, Ceylon, Kerala, the Nilgiris and the Himalayas, I was obliged to make use of informants and interpreters in order to carry out the work. Only in Kalimpong, when I had set up my headquarters there from 1950 to 1956, did I eventually do without interpreters, having learnt Tibetan sufficiently well towards 1952 to be able to dispense with assistance of this kind. Nevertheless, I remained, of course, dependent on informants.

To all these helpers in the field I am extremely grateful, because without their aid it would have been impossible to carry out the ethnographic study. Except for Kerala, where I have been expressly asked not to make any specific mentions, I would like to thank each and every one personally by name. In the case of the interpreter with whom I worked among the Todas, I would also like to give a short synopsis of his personality and life-history, because it appears to me essential that it is realized fully through what human medium the necessary information was gathered and contact with the tribe established.

In Ceylon, concerning Mr. G. H. Ellawala with whom I worked in Ratnapura, I cannot sufficiently express how great is my debt towards him. Not only did he take time off to accompany me to the dwellings of some of his poorest and most humble tenants (and all those of my readers who know the Orient will appreciate what this means), but he also acted as interpreter himself during our visits and supplied me with much honest and outspoken information in explanation of the material that I was gathering. Long after I had left Ceylon, he furthermore very willingly wrote to me additional data of which I was in need, replying promptly and fully to the, sometimes for him, obscure questions which I put to him about marriage rules and the patrilineal and matrilineal descent groups in the Kandyan provinces.

In Kerala, thanks to the kindness and hospitality of the managing director of the Metal Industries Ltd., Shoranur, Sri A. N. Poduval, I

12:Peter E-5 (1939, 1949)1963 AW11 Kerala
West Tibetans AT9
Toda Aw60
Tibet AT1

In 1931, he married a Tamil woman (that is, someone not of his community) and his eldest son was born in 1932. He subsequently had two more children, two daughters, in 1943 and 1936.

It was in 1935 that he began acting as interpreter and "guide", as he termed it, to Dr. M. B. Emeneau, and he continued to do so until 1938. He also served others in the same capacity during this time, and his health, happily, remained good. In 1939, he acted as my interpreter, but in 1942 he became seriously ill again with his old affliction, and, in Travancore, in the American Hospital of Trivandrum, was successfully operated upon for a second time. On his return he became an influential member of the Toda Welfare Committee, a body set up by the Collector of the Nilgiris to assist the community.

Since then, he has been residing at the Toda Christian colony near Fern Hill, Ootacamund, where he has a small plot of land and a vegetable garden, the produce of which he sells in the local market. From the latest news that I have received from him, I understand that he is still carrying on with these same occupations, working hard and with a considerable measure of success to improve the lot of his fellow Todas, to whom he is attached with a devotion amounting nearly to a fanatical "nationalism", for he refuses to let his erstwhile connection with a Christian Mission "detribalize" him in any way.

Those who have helped me in the same way as the informants and interpreters mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, have been far greater in number in the areas of Tibetan affinity, in the Himalayas, than in any other of the fields which I visited. In addition to assistants and interpreters of the kind I have already described, they also include Tibetologists and teachers from whom I obtained, not only information about Tibetan polyandry, but also a general knowledge of everything Tibetan which has stood me in good stead.

First and foremost among such helpers should be mentioned Dr. George Nikolaivitch Roerich. Initially, we became acquainted in 1938, when he was residing with his father, the late Professor Nicolas Roerich, his mother and his brother, Svetoslav, at Nagar, in the Kulu valley of the Punjab. It was through him that I met the Gya-kar K'ham-pa chieftain, Tsewang Norbu, and the former monk, Lobsang, from Shigatse. Through his intermediary too, my wife and I equipped ourselves properly for the 600 miles trek from Kulu to Kashmir over Lahul, Rupchu and Ladak.

Our second meeting was in Kalimpong, West Bengal, in 1950. Disturbances resulting from the partition of India into India proper and

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Pakistan had forced his family – minus his father who had died during the war – to move their residence from Kulu, and they had settled down temporarily in this small frontier town at the end of the Trade Route to Lhasa. Dr. Roerich was instrumental in obtaining good Tibetan teachers for me; he greatly assisted me in the task of meeting prominent personalities from Tibet and in obtaining the ethnographical artefacts and books which I had been assigned to purchase for the Third Danish Expedition to Central Asia. A great Tibetan scholar of a quality rarely to be found today, he was unfailing in his willingness to help and gave me great assistance, during the seven years that I was in residence in Kalimpong, in my efforts to learn Tibetan correctly and to gather information about the customs and ways of the people of Tibet. I was indeed fortunate in having made the acquaintance and gained the friendship of so outstanding an authority.

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During my stay in Lahul in the summer of 1938, I was greatly assisted in the initial research work by the Reverend F. A. Peter of the Moravian Mission in Kyelang. Through him I came into contact with my first polyandrous families, and his knowledge of the region and of its inhabitants freely put at my disposal, was a very great help at a time when I was beginning my exploration of Tibetan culture.

Through the Reverend Peter I got to know the principal chieftain of the valley of Lahul, Wazir Thakur Partap Chand. This man, who spoke perfect English and was unfailing in his desire to be of assistance and to receive me with proper hospitality in his domain, gave me considerable information concerning the polyandry of the valley. Always outspoken and sincere, he made no attempt to disguise the nature of the institution as practised in Lahul, and the data that I gathered through his intermediary is among the best that I have.

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In Rupchu, I was left more or less to myself and, in the absence even of interpreters, had to make the best of my English-speaking Punjabi bearer and of the Hindusthani which he and Lobsang could speak together.

At Leh, however, in Ladak, during my stay there of over a month, I again found invaluable helpers and interpreters, through whom material of even greater value to my research work was gathered.

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Thus my thanks are due to the Reverend Walter Asboe, superintendent of the Moravian Mission, who welcomed me on arrival in Leh and never ceased during the whole period of my visit to take an interest in my quest and to put everything he knew of the people and customs at my disposal. A long experience and a sympathetic understanding of